

Attendance Matters Initiative

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***Key words:* attendance, graduation, early intervention, graduation coach**

Funding Sources:

- District supported incentives: Approximately \$1,000 (Year 1)
- Printing: \$2,961 (Year 1)
- Although not required, some schools provided no-cost and/or low-cost incentives
- No cost for staff trainings, parent workshops, and social media

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

During the 2016-17 school year, the district purchased brag tags as incentives for students who had perfect attendance each month (see Appendix A). At the time this incentive program was introduced schools were told that the district would cover the cost for the first year. Additionally, schools were very creative in designing ways to recognize and celebrate excellent attendance through incentives that were of little to no cost.

Printing expenditures were used to create posters, flyers, parent handouts, and yellow cards to support the messaging component of the initiative. There were no additional expenditures for staff training, reports, parent workshops, and media outreach.

Project Description:

We recognized that dropout prevention begins in the early grades. Positive attendance is a key indicator for reading on grade level, academic success, and high school completion. Therefore, we set out to create a culture where all students, parents, and staff understood the importance of excellent attendance and how it can impact academic, social, emotional, and post-secondary success. Our goal was to implement universal, targeted, and intensive strategies that would have a positive impact on school attendance.

Prior to our Attendance Matters Initiative there was not a districtwide or universal approach to address attendance. Schools focused on average daily attendance for the school and addressing students who were in violation of the state compulsory attendance law; excessive unexcused absences were met with punitive action. The Attendance Matters Initiative focuses on the impact of days of lost instruction regardless of whether the absence is excused, unexcused, or due to a suspension. There are no penalties for students or parents in relation to this initiative. The emphasis is on building relationships with students and families and building connections between students and schools that will lead to positive attendance.

By employing a variety of tools, we created an interdepartmental collaborative approach to increase awareness of the importance of excellent school attendance throughout the district; we utilized research and resources available via Attendanceworks.com, conference presentations, webinars, and through the experiences of our Graduation Coaches and School Social Workers.

Staffing Pattern:

Lisa Brenner, Student Services Officer
Jennifer Alonso, Graduation Services Coordinator
Cami Hallgarth, K-8 Graduation Coach
Nikki Parker, K-8 Graduation Coach
School Social Workers
School Administrators

Project Collaborators: Academic Improvement Officers, ESL-Parent Outreach

Population Served:

Approximately 17,500 students attending 42 schools, grades Pre-K to 8.

The 2016-17 district demographics were: Black 48.6%; Hispanic 26.6%; White 19.7%; Multiracial 4.4%; Asian .7%; and American Indian .1%

Project Origination:

The Attendance Matters initiative was designed and implemented to provide a uniform approach to address the high percentage of students with chronic attendance issues throughout the district. We shifted the focus from school daily attendance averages to individual student attendance.

Issues Addressed:

- Chronic Absenteeism
- Importance of Attendance (students, parents, and staff).
- Shifting the mindsets on how we respond and prepare for absences
- Educating staff and parents that all absences despite the reason result in lost instruction and have an impact on student outcomes
- Maintaining accurate attendance data

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

- Awareness of the impact of lost instructional days (excused, unexcused, and suspensions).
- Shift the focus from average daily attendance percentages to individual student attendance.
- Build relationships with families and students to encourage positive attendance.
- Create a culture and climate where all students understand the importance of being in school all day every day.
- Provide districtwide professional development opportunities and parent workshops.
- Develop understandings in staff that they can make an impact on attendance.
- Improve individual student attendance and decrease chronic absenteeism.

Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:

- Create monthly attendance reports that focus on individual student data capturing YTD absences regardless of excused, unexcused, or suspension. These reports include actual year to date absences while predicting potential students who are entering a level of early warning or chronic absenteeism based on national standards.
- The district has two K-8 Graduation Coaches that provide support to 42 elementary schools. Each coach provides direct and indirect services to their assigned schools.
- Graduation coaches provide schools with monthly reports, an overview of the data, and tips and strategies to principals and school social workers.

- Graduation coaches met with principals, social workers, and/or attendance teams to help find solutions for student with chronic attendance or trending towards chronic attendance.
- Utilized monthly reports to drive universal, targeted, and school-based strategies and interventions.
- Created a “Yellow Card” that fits behind staff badges that includes nine questions to consider before suspending a student (see Appendix B).
- Provided schools with resources such as flyers, handouts, success tips, and making attendance plans in both English and Spanish.
- Celebrated districtwide Attendance Awareness Month celebrations.
- Partnered with the Children’s Museum to support perfect attendance during Attendance Awareness month (September)
- Implemented evidence-based strategies.
- Joined Attendance Works – Superintendent’s Call to Action.
- Implemented districtwide incentive program during the 2016-17 school year. Some schools decided to fund and continue the initiative through the 2017-18 school year. (Students with perfect attendance for the month earned a customized attendance brag tag which allowed each student to start over monthly).
- Coaches worked with schools to identify and create their own no cost or low cost incentive and recognition programs to support the initiative.
- Provided parent attendance workshops in both English and Spanish.
- Provided ongoing professional development to support staff.
- Used social media to promote awareness and highlight schools.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

The Attendance Matters initiative has increased the awareness of staff, students, and parents of the importance of excellent attendance and how poor attendance, particularly those missing 18 or more days per year can impact academic, social, emotional, and post-secondary success.

- Effectively shifted focus from addressing unexcused absences to creating an understanding that the academic impact of lost instructional time is the same whether the absence is excused, unexcused, or due to a suspension.
- Increased parent awareness of the importance of positive attendance habits through individual meetings and parent workshops.
- Successfully shifted the focus from daily attendance averages to individual student attendance by utilizing the monthly attendance reports. These reports contained individual actual and predictive student data which assisted in early detection and intervention.
- Increased the staff, parent, and student awareness on the importance of positive attendance.
- Provided ongoing professional development opportunities to increase staff awareness and share evidence-based strategies to address barriers to excellent attendance.

Project Timeline:

Ongoing

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

The Attendance Matters Initiative focused heavily on grades K-8 therefore there is no direct data available at this time for dropout or graduation rates.

Special Conditions, Expertise, and/or Skills Required to Carry Out Project:

To properly support this project staff must have knowledge of how attendance affects student outcomes, evidence-based strategies, technical skills, strong relationship building skills, and willingness to participate in ongoing professional development. Some recommended professional development opportunities include webinars provided by Attendance Works, National Dropout Prevention conferences, and National Student Attendance, Engagement, and Success Center National Convening.

Current Status of Project:

The Attendance Matters initiative is ongoing. We use the summer break to review and reflect on the previous year's implementation and determine areas of the plan that may need to be updated. Additionally, we create the plan of roll out for the upcoming school year. Many schools have seen success since the inception of the initiative and the rest continue to grow.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

As the Graduation Services Coordinator I work first hand with the Attendance Matters initiative providing direct support including:

- Managing district-wide monthly reports
- Providing bilingual parent workshops during school and ESL events
- Creating and maintaining a district-wide database of resources for staff
- Facilitating data talks with support staff
- Managing the district's Student Services twitter account to promote attendance awareness
- Participating in ongoing professional development and related conference attendance
- Collaborating regularly with graduation coaches and the Student Services officer to create incentive programs and assess district needs

Lessons Learned:

- It is vital to train all staff on the impact that positive attendance has on student outcomes and how quickly absences add up resulting in gaps in learning. It is very important that staff understand that they can make a huge difference in improving student outcomes increasing on time graduation rates, and post-secondary opportunities.
- Support and ownership from leadership will increase the overall success.

- Accurate individual student progress monitoring is key to early interventions that can dramatically reduce chronic absenteeism and increase student academic and social/emotional outcomes.
- Make sure that teachers truly understand the why and how they impact student success.
- Initiative must be clear and not confused with the board policy concerning truancy.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

- Begin with buy-in from school and district leaders.
- Focus on excellent attendance vs. perfect attendance.
- Relationships between graduation coaches, staff, schools, parents, and students are the key to overall success.
- Celebrate monthly successes no matter how small.
- Focus on positive problem solving.
- Include support staff and teachers in developing a plan for school implementation.
- Build a list of comprehensive strategies and interventions over time using best practices available on sites such as attendanceworks.com